

FICTION

conditions for creation

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The **FICTION** project emerged four months ago as one of those “wouldn't it be cool if...” ideas. Too often, these thoughts are tossed aside due to lack of money, exhibition space, or the time and energy to make it happen. Fortunately, this one did not get away.

It began when James Huckenpahler approached one of the WPA\Corcoran Program Review Committee (PRC) members and told him about his idea. Within a short time, the proposal was reviewed, approved, a time slot designated, and the participants identified. Perhaps most importantly, the project was allotted a budget from the proceeds raised at the WPA\C's 1997 Art Auction. At a time when the Washington arts community is feeling the pressures brought on by reductions in funding, it is gratifying to know that we can continue to support great ideas and talented artists.

There are a number of people who deserve thanks for their commitment to this exhibition. **FICTION** writers Kristen Hileman, Beth Joselow, Paul Roth, and Bernard Welt, and artists James Huckenpahler, Chris Capone, Kenseth Armstead, and Sherene Offutt are the heart of this project. Thank you all for getting excited about the idea and taking it to this level. Kendall Buster, chair of the PRC, has been an important advocate for this show and for so many emerging artists in the Washington region. Thanks for all your work on behalf of the WPA\C. A member of the PRC for the past year, Ken Ashton has devoted a great deal of time and effort to make sure that **FICTION** stayed on track and turned into a terrific show. The rest of the committee members must also be thanked: Cynthia Connolly, Bill Dunlap, Karen Holzberg, Nicole Jundanian, Edith Kuhnle, Annette Polan,

Christopher Reutershan and Beth Seidel. Six months ago the WPA\C had little more than a gritty off-site space. Now we have got a clear direction and a year's worth of great programs.

There are many other individuals who have been invaluable to this project. Corcoran Design Director Lisa Ratkus and designer Nancy Van Meter worked with a limited budget to create a great invitation and assisted James with all of the details (and last minute changes) of this publication. Laura Coyle lent us her time and terrific editing skills. Joon Lee helped us with much-needed technical support to put this information on the web. Francis Byrne worked wonders once again to help install and light the artwork under less-than-ideal conditions. WPA\C interns Rebecca Lemmon and Kari Sullivan have worked tirelessly to accomplish a myriad tasks for the organization. Countless volunteers also helped with mailings, preparation of the space, the opening, and related events. No WPA\C program could exist without their help. Finally, my thanks to David Levy, President and Director of the Corcoran, and Jack Cowart, Deputy Director and Chief Curator of the Corcoran, for their continuing support of the WPA\Corcoran.

Nadine Gabai-Botero
WPA\Corcoran Program Manager

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The FICTION project is a collaboration between writers and visual artists that inverts their usual working relationships. Rather than address art objects after they are created, the writers imagine their own causes and conditions for the production of visual art.

The writers pose the following questions to the artists: If artists destroy their work out of spite for a disinterested public, what meaning would exist in the debris (the Techno-mannerism of Kristen Hileman and James Huckenpahler)? If non-visual artists are suddenly incapable of operating in their usual media, what kinds of visual works would they create (the Aural Art movement of Paul Roth and Kenseth Armstead)? How might artists encode their works as an expression of privacy or intimacy in a world that has become increasingly interconnected and intrusive (the Encryption movement of Beth Joselow and Chris Capone)? Can art have an implicit function in society and at the same time offer many dimensions of interpretation (the art of the Altamonti as proposed by Bernard Welt and Sherene Offutt)?

With questions like these in mind, participants are required to pursue a fiction long enough to examine assumptions about contemporary art creation. Writers, now at the front end of the process, become deeply engaged in the slipperiness of defining historical truth. Artists, directed toward different modes of working, critique the relationship of their personal identity to the objects they create. And finally, when presented with the art and the texts to which it responds, the audience may fully participate in the cultural dialogue between history and identity. ■

THE ENCRYPTION MOVEMENT

by Beth Joselow

As the 21st century and its new millennium dawned, the cultural world, particularly the Western cultural world, reflected a rapid diminishment of privacy. The commercialization of art at this time, the turning away from high art toward populist icons and genres (see: Disney, Pepsi, Microsoft, Starbucks, et al) was no accident.

Artists reacting to a perceived assault on personal identity and autonomy, rebelled by privatizing their work through some rather extreme means.

The movement, eventually named The Encryption Movement, seemed to grow spontaneously, erupting simultaneously in a number of large American cities. Appearances dotted Western Europe as well, but the Encryptionists never gained much momentum in Eastern Europe, where privacy was more often regarded as not available and therefore non-debatable. Although it originated just as Earth Art was developing an identity as a planetary-wide definition of made things, the Encryption Movement did not travel to Asia or Africa, as far as is known.

The work produced by the artists in the movement was rarely seen. Rather, statements and manifestos appeared as handouts on streetcorners, graffiti in public conveyances and bathrooms, interruptions to radio and tv programming, and spam sent widely over the Internet. Here is a brief example of a typical statement of '01 or '02:

Do you know me? I carry the American Express card. And I am carried as well by MasterCard, Visa, The United States government, The New York Times, the IRS, the public school system, the international banking system, the health secret police, the army, the navy, the marines, the coast guard, the neighborhood watch, the dept of social work, the post office, the telephone company, the gas and electric company, the yearbook, your mother, your father and your next-door neighbor. I requested my file but they told me there wasnt one. Fat Chance! Check it out. Now is the time for all good men and women to find their files and destroy them. Tune in... or drop out of sight.

It is widely thought that this statement is related to a large bonfire fueled by a massive sculpture of files made of wood and other combustible materials that was set on the grounds of the Social Security Administration early in 2003. Many hundreds of people burned their Social Security cards at this event. Similar fires were set at other sites: Bureaus of Motor Vehicles, the offices of university registrars, the IRS, and so on, where data on individuals was routinely collected.

Art historians have had to work to uncover the identities of the artists involved, which yet remain uncertain because those involved changed their names and vital statistics frequently.

All of the members of the core group for some time shaved their heads, wore identical clothing printed with the stenciled number 123456 across the front of their shirts, and on their forearms. It is not known how many artists participated in the core group. There were many imitators.

While the artists were determined to keep their purposes and identities secret, they feared the charge of elitism. For this reason, they peppered public venues with their work, and occasionally turned up vigilante fashion in small posses, all wearing disguises, to educate the man on the street about their cause. These brief seemingly spontaneous lectures (or rants) were rarely recorded.

The nature of the examples of what is thought to be Encryptionist work today is so mysterious and/or esoteric that placing it within the movement is challenging. It is known, however, that identifying marks and messages were sometimes pastiched or embedded in paintings and three-dimensional work.

A series of icons, whose complex meanings seem to have been known to all initiates in the movement, appears along with most extant examples of the work of this movement. Classical and simple in form, the icons are an aesthetic language, one that can be completely understood by those who have been introduced to these ciphers, but which makes it impossible for most non-initiates to penetrate the privacy of the art protected by this code. There is also the possibility that some of what we see today is not authentic iconography. In some cases, it would be impossible to authenticate the work of the Encryptionists without destroying the pieces themselves.

The background of the movement is much more accessible. The right to privacy was a relatively contemporary concept in the 20th century, a blip in the history of social life. Yet in a very short time, privacy had come to be coveted by individuals at almost any level. For one thing, it was seen as a privilege of the elite. Evidence of the overriding moral uncertainty of the late 20th century was demonstrated by the growing number of publications and television programs which offered entertainment in the form of revealing



secrets (sometimes as confessions) of celebrities of all sorts, and of average people, most of whom appear to have been members of a lower class. So it is not surprising that the loss of privacy, at that time, would have been disturbing to many who observed this phenomenon as non-participants, and who had become used to a degree of private time, private space, and private ideas and information that we cannot imagine today.

In what was considered at the time to be a more serious incursion, The Information Age brought with it new means for overcoming individual and cultural boundaries of privacy, via the Internet, primitive electronic telephone and video surveillance devices, computer data collections, and enhanced government record keeping. In reaction to the vastly improved capability of the government and other large institutions to find, keep, organize and access information on all citizens, public paranoia also increased (see *X-Files*, the President-as-criminal film movement: *Absolute Power*, *Murder at 1600*, *Nixon*, and many other examples).

Much of the work of this movement has never been found, although evidence of a vast archive, yet to be discovered, exists. ■

Chris Capone
Untitled (detail), 1998
spray paint and dirt on paper, 18" x 24"

THE AURAL ART MOVEMENT

by Paul Roth

The Aural Art movement was short-lived and is generally overlooked by critics and art historians: its aims are now considered eccentric and minor, the artists generally regarded as untalented. But for many reasons, this movement warrants scrutiny. First, certain artists aligned with the movement did (and continue to do) work of great interest and merit. Second, the movement itself is unusual in its self-conscious, post-historical origins. An organized effort rather than an isolated circumstance, it began and spread virtually on the internet and in localized warrens. Finally, Aural's rapid demise is also of interest. Lasting just a few years, this movement holds a minor place at the table of art history as one of the many transcendental and millennial art movements intended to transform the visual arts.

Early dedicated members of the movement, living in and around New York City, were five musicians. They were united by a shared experience: all had their lives altered and their gift derailed by devastating physical injuries, destructive illnesses, or worsening chronic conditions. This core group came together in response to an internet newsgroup ad placed by James Paterston, a classical clarinetist who had suffered the complete disfigurement of his palate and jaw in an auto accident. A self-help, recovery-based meeting followed.

These musicians, both in person at subsequent New York City meetings and via e-mail, discussed their shared sense of victimization. The "failure" of their bodies (the "tools" of their expression) and the difficulty of making musical art united them in anger, depression, and frustration. However, the members forged a collective strength from their struggles. Determined to regain hope, the group established a dependent camaraderie and developed a fierce desire to find a new way to create art. In time, as a result of many discussions and trips to museums, the idea took hold that perhaps they could express musical concepts and sate their creative urges by making images: by transforming themselves from musicians into visual artists.

It is commonly believed that the Aural Artists were influenced by art therapy. In fact, while it was a central feature of the later movement, core group members were repelled by such theories. They rejected the idea that art production should be essentially a psychological or therapeutic practice which would mark them as victims. Despite reservations about how their efforts would be received, the group responded excitedly to the challenges and opportunities posed by this untried avenue of expression. They each began to make art. Pleased by their initial results, they agreed one night (February 3, 1999) to declare themselves practitioners of a move-

ment based on the idea that musical ideas can be expressed visually. They jointly wrote a manifesto declaring their goals and created a world wide web site for their group. They anticipated that others would join them via the internet and bring different ideas into play.

For some time (not quite two years), excitement reigned among the group and new initiates. The growing (but still small) New York City scene began exhibiting in unusual venues, including soundstages, warehouses, and concert halls, as well as more standard, existing galleries and performance spaces. Members initially prized the idea of the collective and maintained their movement identity for exhibition publicity. Attention grew beyond local buzz and art scene publications to the popular local press. Early critical commentary centered on the novelty of the movement's circumstances and ideals.

Founder Paterston began making precisely-detailed figurative studies in acrylic, offering a kind of antidote to his own grievous bodily injury by painting musicians in extreme close-up at specific moments of particular compositions. For example, he rendered Thelonius Monk's hands at an instant of colliding notes as he plays the composition "Monk's Dream," and the corner of Louis Armstrong's ecstatic mouth as he draws out the last verse of "What a Wonderful World."

Other prominent New York City members include:

Milosz Sonofski (born Warsaw, Poland, 1948). Tenor opera singer. Condition: Cancerous node on vocal cords, surgically removed with permanent damage to voice. Became: Painter, making abstractions based on a systematic color and value interpretation of the twelve-tone scale.

Anderson Black (born Petaluma, California, 1961). Pianist. Condition: Deafness from nerve disorder. Became: Computer artist, making giant giclee print abstractions from e.q. levels and graphs charted from digitally re-recorded music; transposes specific sonic horizons to graphics programs and uses them to plot color and shape.

Peter Ivory (born Aberdeen, Washington, 1952). Orchestral conductor. Condition: Spinal paralysis. Became: Performance artist, remotely plotting the movements of large numbers of people in public spaces at specific intervals, to the tune of orchestral musical compositions. Volunteers are given "sheet music" (instructions), and an audience watches from overhead.

Kenseth Armstead (born New York City, New York, 1968). Jazz vocalist. Crippling performance anxiety and stage fright. Became: Sculptor, stitching black skins from truck tire inner tubes, to drape and fold across armatures, racks and wires—often in conjunction with piped-in recordings of jazz performance. These visual echoes of the improvisatory character of jazz are memorably dubbed "road music" by one critic.



The initial attention launched many careers. The thrill was short-lived, however. Goodwill among the group, the public, and the press diminished as the movement grew. Publicity and the internet attracted many who did not fit the strict parameters of “membership”: healthy musicians interested in visual art; physically disabled people who had never been musicians; disabled visual artists; and healthy visual artists with an interest in music. The movement became publicly identified as a peculiar sort of self-help group, a kind of national Sunday painter’s club for disabled musicians. The term “aural art” entered mainstream use and was invoked in the hushed tones ordinarily reserved for lepers and the destitute. In due time any artist of talent and vision involved in the project dissociated himself from Aural Art. Watered-down and essentially inert as a medium of serious expression, the movement lives on internationally in cyberspace and is paradoxically more widespread now than ever before.

The reasons for Aural Art’s failure are clear. Some of the most serious artists lacked confidence in their “chosen” form of visual art: they believed that it was inadequate to the instinctual, insistent, pure power of music. Others thought the movement’s desperation—the satiation of needs, the curing of ills—had within it the seeds of its own failure. The principal downfall of the movement, however, was that as an art movement, it was not creative, but rather reactive, its aims more consistent with rehabilitation than with expression. This led to its popularization and expansion, and the corresponding dilution of its goals. ■

Kenseth Armstead
Untitled, Body Work #5 (detail), 1998
rubber and linen thread, 36" x 26"

THE PICTURES OF THE ALTAMONTI

by Bernard Welt

For centuries, the Altamonti were fabled in Europe as the stuff of travelers' tales, as romantic as the "men whose heads do grow beneath their shoulders" invoked in *Othello*. But an antiquarian's trove—of mysterious and ultimately untraceable provenance—that surfaced in London in 1775, drawing the attention of Samuel Johnson, Joseph Priestly, and Lord Monboddo (among other expert scholars), seemed to confirm so particularly the stories told of this legendary mountain people of Asia that even skeptical cultural historians cite the instance as a remarkable key to an inscrutable past, to be mentioned in the same breath with the Rosetta Stone and the Library of Nineveh.

The Altamonti pictures served as the occasion for the only known correspondence between Dr. Johnson and his biographer Boswell's good friend, the radical philosopher Voltaire:

To deal frankly, sir, you know how unlikely it is that I should solicit your opinions on religion or on monarchy, and that I could well wish our mutual friend, and many others in our Europe, less susceptible to your influence. Let it not be said, however, that I deprecate your sincerity or your scholarship. I would have us colleagues, of a sort. Therefore I urge you, take the opportunity to inspect these wonderful pictures of the Altamonti, as they are called. What a vision they afford us of the profoundest roots of all our paltry Oriental romance! You may know that, at first, I held them but a monstrous imposition, like the deplorable "Ossian" of Mr. Macpherson. Not only their quality and their dazzling variety have convinced me, but what I should privately call an "aura"—never let this be heard by my criticks, sir!—of authentic philosophy, of the great mystery of our being. Then, as you shall see, the pictures are accompanied by certain objects lending them credence—but no, I prefer you shall view them without the least prejudice occasioned by the trust or, what may be more likely, mistrust of my opinion.

Many references to the Altamonti and their exotic pictures testify to their power to haunt the Western mind. Before these images surfaced, the legends of the Altamonti drew the particular interest of Marsilio Ficino and Giordano Bruno, Robert Burton and Sir Isaac Newton. Later, when examples of the pictures were available for scrutiny, they were taken up by Benjamin Franklin (who is reputed to have introduced Altamontian themes into American freemasonry), Herman Melville, and William James. The Theosophists held that they were the occult source of the Tarot deck, and Jung is said to have had a positive phobia of them. (Close but confidential

sources claim the Swiss psychologist believed that if he beheld the Altamonti pictures with his own eyes, the event would somehow hasten the end of the world.) Kafka called them "an engraving of Fate on the material world" in *The Penal Colony*, and the scientist/artists of the future in Hermann Hesse's *Magister Ludi* acknowledged them as a source of the glass-bead game to which they devote their lives. Borges' celebrated tale, *A Picture of Time Passing*, explicitly alluded to them as it unfolds its plot in a discrete series of mysterious tableaux.

Some key passages in the Altamonti legend:

JOHN MANDEVILLE (*Travels*, c. 1356):

It was in this realm [Khorasan?] that I first heard the curious history of the Altamonti, who live in the mountainous region of Turkestan by the great city of Samarkand. Happily, this people found a home so situated by trade routes that they were able to provide meager sustenance to improvident travelers in exchange for extravagantly precious goods, so that, over time, this small tribe accumulated unimaginable wealth (though some say they first acquired their riches through mere robbery). Silk and gold, jewels and spices, mean nothing to them, however; their wealth they use only to ensure that no one among them must do any labor, which they leave to slaves. Everyone else spends the day in trade and the evening in conversation and in contemplation of their wonderful picture books.

Their letters I cannot give you, for they do no writing, but I have heard they discarded their former practice of writing as their wealth increased and they ceased to work. But they believe that, by laying their famous pictures together in intricate patterns, they can express anything they would wish to say, or as I have heard, anything they deem worth saying, the meaning of which would go uncomprehended by the vulgar alien. These show pretty scenes of curious proverbs and sayings, hard to fathom, and some I have heard are:

If the farmer's wife could raise men

Putting the milk back in cow

To teach dogs to skip rope

The body with no head seeking the head with no body

Blind, bound, locked in a box at the bottom of the sea

The newborn baby holds the grandmother in its arms

Building a wall to keep out the daylight

When birds need flutes and drums to make music

Bread is no good to a lion

Someone must make the clouds

A loving serpent, a hateful dove

Carrying one's house on one's back

The world is burning

Bury the living and let the dead go free

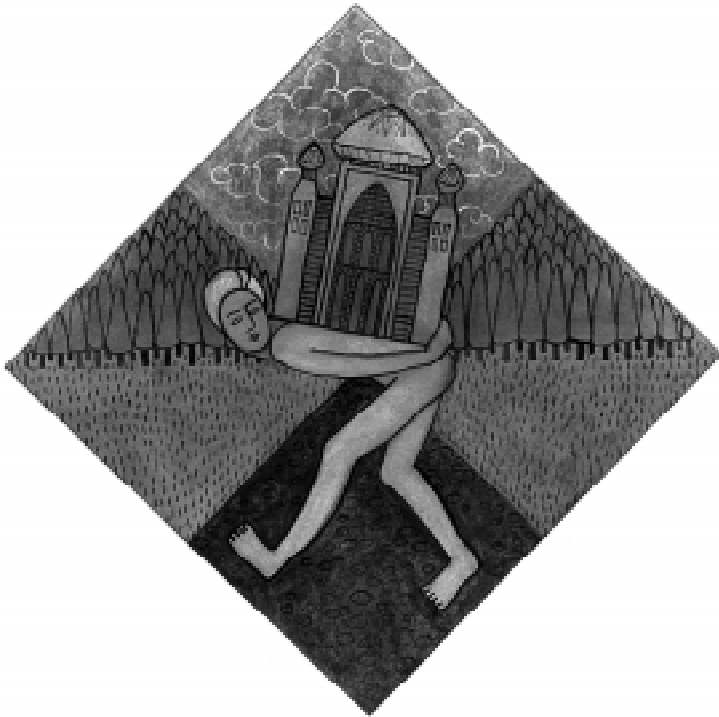
MARCO POLO (*Travels*, c. 1300):

[The Altamonti] labored, no one knows how many centuries, out of sheer habit, until observation of Christian traders encouraged among them a fashion for a day of rest; then the Khazars, who are Jews, introduced them to their own sabbath; then they learned of the worshippers of Mahomet, who have still another day of rest, till, by imitation of the customs of others, their whole week was leisure. . . .

And I have seen these pictures myself, which they call the Pictures of the Glowing World, and I have seen men, women, and children, gazing at them by firelight through a whole night, taking no notice of hunger or bitter cold, or the needs of the body, but passing from one picture to another in rapt contemplation of these images, combining and recombining them, till daylight came to break the spell. And I have heard from the Great Khan Kubilai himself that his people believe there is no worthier object in life than to study these images, and that he has heard from one of his wise men that the pictures of the Altamonti show all that has been, will be, or could be in the world, to him that knows how to read them. And I have seen myself that the Altamonti arouse the envy and admiration of all the neighboring peoples, but what is even more noticeable, their contempt.

THOMAS MORE (*Utopia*, c. 1520):

Clearly, it is their isolation on this island that has granted the Utopians the security to turn their attention to higher things, even as a similar geographical remoteness, and sufficiency of the means of living, perverted the imagination of the famous Altamonti, who spend all their lives in foolish contemplation of trivial pictures, such as a child might scrawl out to fill an idle hour.



Altamonti artisan

Carrying one's house on one's back, c. 1275 A.D.

pigment on paper, 5" x 5"

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE (*Of Credulousness*, 1680):

Shall I believe, as travellers say, that the pictures of the Altamonti were with us at the beginning of the world--that they were made by no man's hand? A likely tale. But if, as is said, they show all things possible to be believed, must they not derive, by some means, from some source more than human? If prophecy may be spoken through a man's mouth, why not drawn through a man's--or a woman's--hand? Then, too, the boys on my estate speak of pictures that appear, as if by magic, on walls deep within caverns, where no man could reach . . .

JOHN WEBSTER (*The Duchess of Malfi*, 1623):

Cardinal: Your Grace, I have in hand a letter--

Ferdinand: Tell me not in letters, but make me Your meaning perfect in a picture, as we hear The Altamonti use to do.

Cardinal: Aye, the Altamonti

That doe gaze all daye on images of things

Chimerical, fantastic, most unnatural.

Ferdinand: A letter is a thing unnatural--[*Takes it, reads*]

And this one worst than most . . .

THOMAS BROWNE (*Hydriotaphia, or Urne-Buriall*, 1658):

Who knows whether the best of men be known? or whether there be not more remarkable persons forgot, then any that stand remembered in the known account of time? What lies beneath the Arabian sands? The Dreame-Booke of the Altamonti, as the learned say, may depict all things that may be, in this world or the next. But who has seen it? And who has studied to construe its marvelous colored figures?

The tradition that there were 480 pictures in all appears to derive from the *Kuzari* of Yehudah ha-Levi (c. 1140); the number is probably the product of Kabbalistic numerology. Descriptions--if that is what they are--suggest that many of the pictures are of simple and homely subjects, but it is only bizarre, and clearly intentionally paradoxical depictions that have reached us. Contemporary methods of dating have confirmed that the Altamonti pictures derive from sometime in the 11th-14th centuries; critical study suggests tantalizing possibilities but no definitive signs of influence from other identifiable cultures. To enhance the air of mystery surrounding the artifacts, all owners since their first appearance have insisted upon perfect anonymity. Under the circumstances, it is impossible to establish with any clarity the geographical location of the mountain home of the Altamonti--or indeed, with any certainty, their existence. The Picture Book of the Altamonti constitutes the condensed wisdom of a culture as elusive as Shangri-La--which may ultimately be shown to have existed only in the realm of imagination. ■

TECHNO-MANNERISM

by Kristen Hileman

Overview

The Techno-Mannerists were a group of American painters who, at the end of the twentieth century, developed a sophisticated and sarcastic rebuttal to political and popular cultures' attacks on the visual arts. Emphasizing the marketing and serialization of the images they produced rather than the original art object, these artists affected aspects of mass media communications, video and computer technology and the logic of consumerism in their art process.

Techno-Mannerism was grounded in the art of the twentieth century. The movement shares an intellectual heritage with Dadaism, Warholian pop art, and the statistically democratic art of Komar and Melamid. However, the profound aesthetic crisis reflected by Techno-Mannerism has caused historians to use a label which acknowledges the movement's affinity to the 16th century Mannerists who also worked during a time of artistic and political anxiety. The work of both Techno-Mannerists and the original Mannerists is infused with an aesthetic of artificiality. This singular style stems from the deliberate and extreme incorporation of selected innovations made by their creative predecessors: for the Mannerists the preceding influence was Michelangelo, for the Techno-Mannerists the influence lay in high-tech media and marketing.

Origins of the Purple Mao Corporation

During the late-twentieth century, express political attacks on the visual arts were made in the United States, with claims that the culture of contemporary art was fundamentally elitist, and therefore not deserving of federal funding. The American National Endowment for the Arts was eliminated. Increasingly the public's contact with visual culture was limited to technological media: television, video, film and digital imagery.

Crisis overcame contemporary visual artists, particularly painters who sensed that their creative endeavors were doomed as audiences consisted of increasingly jaded viewers who expected a high level of kinetic spectacle to be delivered in a relatively short amount of time and with minimal ambivalence. Artists were confronted with a public that valued facsimile or transmitted reality over original thought and structure. More and more, no visual encounter was unmediated. Primary experience became outdated and impossible.

A group of painters coalesced to combat these trends by exploiting them, i.e. cynically popularizing their work by using spectacle, technology and marketing. These artists pooled their resources to create the Purple Mao Corporation, an entity to finance and market their artistic projects. Within only a few years of its founding, the Purple Mao Corporation had expanded to finance the work of like-minded artists internationally and was reaping significant profits.

The Purple Mao appellation honors Andy Warhol as a visionary forebear of the Techno-Mannerists, specifically referencing a wallpaper pattern the artist produced with repeated images of the twentieth-century Chinese Communist leader Mao Tse-Tung against a purple background. Warhol's Purple Mao emblem offered eloquent aesthetic insight into the ironies of mass culture for the Techno-Mannerists.

Process

The process of the Techno-Mannerists can best be understood by following the general life cycle of their artworks. As soon as these artists began to paint a work, they would, with funding from the Purple Mao Corporation, ar-



Advertising for Purple Mao Cola; The reverse of the can featured a reproduction of the painting *Descent of the Mercury Bodhisattva*, attributed to **Dante Allegory** which may have been a pseudonym for, or from the school of James Huckenpahler, exact medium and date of creation unknown; probably destroyed 1998.

range for video documentation and provide the public 24 hour access to their studio with a live digital camera feed onto the Purple Mao Corporation's website. To ensure interest in the website and to increase the spectacle of the video, artists would intersperse both real and staged personal dramas (i.e. explicit sexual affairs, drug use, brawls, intimate confessions) with the more mundane footage of them working on their painting.

Additionally, the website showcased slick, high-intensity advertising for the debut of the finished painting at the opening. Openings were publicized as the one and only venue for seeing a completed work live, and a limited number of tickets were made available at premium prices. On the night of the opening, visitors could purchase copies of the video documentation of the artwork as well as various types of reproductions. Initially, with limited financial resources, these reproductions took the form of polaroids, color xeroxes, posters and computer prints. As the Purple Mao Corporation became more financially viable, the paintings were reproduced in an extensive line of merchandise including neckties, t-shirts, lunchboxes, and umbrellas. Many times musicians composed soundtracks for the works, with songs being performed live at the opening and thereafter available on CD. Combining visual arts with contemporary music was an effective way of packaging Techno-Mannerist artwork, expanding its audience and increasing ticket sales to openings.

The true draw for openings, however, was the grand finale, when the Techno-Mannerist artists destroyed their original art work, smashing, slicing or burning it beyond recovery. As the movement progressed, an internal rivalry sprang up among the Techno-Mannerists, with each artist trying to demolish their paintings in the most flamboyant manner, often employing heavy machinery or pyrotechnics.

After openings, galleries would function as shops, selling merchandise based on the original Techno-Mannerist works. Museum gift shops were largely expanded to accommodate Techno-Mannerist "exhibitions." Virtual collections of intact Techno-Mannerist paintings existed on CD-rom. For Techno-Mannerists the ultimate success of a painting was determined by how well the merchandise based on it sold. Traditional art criticism of aesthetic values was largely invalidated, and the art critic's role became one of market analysis, i.e. assessing to what degree the public was buying into the Techno-Mannerists' physical product and thereby deriving how strong the movement's conceptual premise was. That the general public was consuming Techno-Mannerist products without gaining a more refined appreciation for the movement's conceptual basis only fueled the movement's cynicism and determination to manipulate the tools of mass consumption, placing fine artists in positions of marketing power.

Content

The Techno-Mannerists chose subject matter on the basis of its marketability. Initially, these artists created emotionally and intellectually neutral abstract designs which employed colors based on the computer screen palette. Not only were these designs easily transferable to merchandise and pleasingly accessible to the public, but it allowed the Techno-Mannerists to detach themselves from works that were destined to be destroyed in their original tactile form.

As the movement gained fervor, the Techno-Mannerists began to choose figurative subjects and paint in a fashion worthy of an inebriated El Greco. At their peak, the Techno-Mannerists felt that the more exquisite the original work, then whorishly reproduced and destroyed, the more profound the sacrifice made to the insensitivities of mass technology and consumer culture.

Contemporary interpretations of Olympian bacchanalias, the Last Judgment and Dante's multi-leveled hell allowed artists maximum opportunity to depict spectacle that was both titillating to and morally condemning of their audience. Depictions of cyber gods violently carousing with mortals and lost souls experiencing various gradations of high tech torment also referenced the multiple structures of reality that technology had introduced into society. At this point, the Techno-Mannerist palette expanded to include colors featured in clothing lines from popular retail chains, Las Vegas neons and Disney primaries.

Additionally, these subjects required that a large number of eccentric figures be included in the paintings. Each individual figure could then inspire its own line of merchandise. The Techno-Mannerists would create action figures, comic books, animated TV shows and computer games based on the interactions of their figurative subjects.

Conclusions

Ultimately, the Techno-Mannerists sought to reveal the sordidness of popularizing and accelerating the aesthetic process. The Techno-Mannerist conceptual agenda centered on the belief that art for the masses ceases to be authentic art, becoming instead entertainment/merchandise. The movement cannot be deemed entirely reactionary, however, as it introduced radical shifts in the way that artists engaged their audiences and conceived of the time and place for presenting their artwork. Rather than redirect the course of art history back to the grand tradition of the Old Masters, Techno-Mannerism challenged artists to make their art relevant in a high tech, consumption driven world while maintaining aesthetic integrity. ■

CONTRIBUTORS

Kenseth Armstead is a media consultant and sculptor. He participated in the development of the Rhizome Internet website/database and mailing list on new media art and was content acquisitions manager for the StockObjects web site. As a founding member of the art collective X-PRZ, his multimedia installations have been exhibited internationally, including the Whitney Museum of American art, Berlin Video festival, Museum of Contemporary Art and The National Civil Rights Museum. Armstead participated in the Global Youth Exchange Program in 1996 and served as the US representative of Arts and Technology to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. In the fall of 1997 he was an artist in residence at Sculpture Space.

Chris Capone is a mural painter and interior designer for commercial clients as well as private commissions. He recently completed the interior for Mike Baker's Tenth Street Grill. Currently he is writing a graphic novel titled *Market Forces*.

Kristen Hileman is Curator at the Arlington Arts Center in Arlington, VA and writes regularly for the Washington, DC-area arts publication *Articulate*. In the fall of 1997, she curated the exhibition *The Last Man*, an exploration of the work of three figurative artists and the "end of history." Hileman is currently working on *High Definition*, a six person show which will be on view at the Arlington Arts Center as part of *ArtSites 98*.

James Huckenpahler, a media consultant and visual artist, spent the past year working with the MILLS•DAVIS consultancy on the development of the Digital Roadmaps Project, an educational initiative that is focused on the networked-digital future of printing and publishing. Currently, he is developing *Perfect Skin*, a suite of electronic images that explore the places where internal and external are mediated.

Beth Joselow is a writer of poems, plays and non-fiction. She has published five books of poems, the most recent of which is *Excontemporary*, and three non-fiction books, and has had work in scores of magazines over the past 25 years. Her collaboration

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Paul Roth is the curatorial assistant for photography and media arts at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. He writes film notes for the National Gallery of Art and recently organized retrospectives of the filmmakers John Cohen and Gordon Parks. Published in *Photo Review* and *Independent Film and Video Monthly*, his recent interview with photographer Bruce Davidson was published in the Danish magazine *Katalog*. His photography was featured in WPA\C's 1997 *Options* exhibition of emerging artists, and he is currently working on a new series of symbolic image-conjunctions in cyanotype, palladium, and gold-toned printing out paper.

Bernard Welt is chairman of the Department of Academic Studies at the Corcoran School of Art in Washington, DC, where he teaches interdisciplinary courses in the humanities, including the history of cinema. He is the author of a book of poetry, *Serenade*, and his written essays on books, film, and art for *The Washington Post*, *washington review of the arts*, *Lambda Book Report*, *The Washington Blade*, and other magazines. His essays on popular culture, originally published in *Art issues*, have been collected in the book, *Mythomania: Fantasies, Fables, and Sheer Lies in Contemporary American Popular Art*. Currently, he is writing a script for a stage play, *Gay Hamlet*.